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ABSTRACT

Ways to improve the role-playing conversations found in most second language textbooks are outlined. It is argued that the conversations are often restrictive, dull, and repetitive, and students respond to them in kind. The teacher can make the target language used more interesting by creating new characters, situations, settings, or objectives. This can be accomplished by using dice to assign attributes, physical characteristics, and abilities to characters, or to change variables in the situation such as country in which the scenario is set, actions taken, time period, or physical environment. The teacher can create categories corresponding to elements in the textbook conversation, list options, and have students use dice to choose them. For example, in a conversation about a trip, variables might include country of destination, length of stay, places visited or activities while traveling, and money available or spent. Interesting role-playing situations can also be created without reference to the textbook: following a map on a board; giving descriptions of places or buildings; or giving descriptions of travel. The techniques reflect theoretical principles of second language teaching and learning. (MSE)

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CANNING CANNED CONVERSATIONS

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This paper will show how to improve on role-playing conversations found in most textbooks.

A unit in any standard conversation textbook often begins with a role-playing conversation between two persons. The conversation is usually a prelude for the target language to be studied in the unit. After the students have completed the task, they may be asked to change partners, repeat the conversation using personal information, or simply move on to the next task. Obviously, while the intent of the exercise is to increase the student's fluency in the target language, the result is often less than optimal.

Textbook conversations are often restrictive, dull and repetitive. Students respond to them in a like manner. Therefore, the teacher needs to create a scenario to change the target language into something vibrant and alive. One way to do this is to create new characters, situations, settings, or objectives. This can be done using a pair of dice to decide certain attributes, physical characteristics, abilities, and so forth. "John" is not just a tag name now for the student performing his role, but has changed into tall/short, kind/cruel, handsome/ugly, professional/unemployed man. The students performing the roleplays now have real identities and

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respond accordingly. This technique can be used in a variety of role-playing situations.

The Dilemma

The average teacher of a second language usually has a text that, at best, is able to impart some language acquisition skills. However, the teacher is not wholly responsible for the student's language acquisition. The student must also be motivated. Lozanov argues that we use only five to ten percent of our mental capabilities (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). It is this unused potential that must be tapped, which requires both the student and the teacher to go beyond what is simply presented in a textbook. The student needs to be shown that English is not just a dead language emanating from the textbook, but is something living and vibrant. If the student's motivation can be stimulated, his/her learning potential will increase. Hence, we come to the dilemma of an inadequate textbook. If the text is inadequate, the student's motivation goes down, thus the learning process is stunted.

Role-playing

First, a description of role-playing is needed. The simplest version has Student A reciting lines from the text to Student B. The students are frequently reading the text with their heads down, in a monotone voice. The students might then supplement their own personal information into the exercise. Clearly, as a learning tool, role-playing in this context is limited and not very useful. Most of the target

language, skills, grammar points, etc. will be forgotten by the time the student begins the next task.

In this light, role-playing, as a learning tool for conversational speakers, has been down graded in recent years. In fact, role-playing conversations following the pattern of a simple stimulus-response theory of learning were beginning to be rejected by the mid 1960's (Carroll, 1964). Rejection of the stimulus-response (S-R) pattern in the 60's gained a critical opponent when Noam Chomsky said:

> A good deal of the foreign language instruction that's going on now... is based on a concept of language...(which assumes) that language is a system of skills and ought to be taught through drill and the formation of S-R associations. I think the evidence is very convincing that that view of language is very erroneous. (Chomsky, 1965; Blair, 1982, p. 5).

Chomsky felt that if language acquisition was acquired in this fashion, it was more than likely that it was by accident rather than for any other reason.

This is not to say, however, that some repetition isn't needed. This is especially true for beginner students, who need to build up their skills. Unfortunately, repetition tasks tend to become time fillers rather than learning experiences. The teacher, therefore, needs to create a situation where the conversation is not simply a canned recital from the textbook, but creates a situation that enlivens and

stimulates the student to take the conversation beyond the textbook. In doing so, the students interest is heightened and the likelihood of remembering the language skills being introduced is increased.

The Solution: Improving The Conversation

Brown and Yule (1983) have pointed out that the primary function of the written language is transactional, and the primary function of spoken language is interactional. However, they both overlap in the context of a textbook that teaches the spoken language (also in such forms as note taking, body language, etc.) The written text is attempting to convey information that is processed into the spoken form. It would seem, therefore, an ideal teaching forum would combine the two to create a 'hands-on' learning situation. This is what using dice for role playing does.

All this being said, how can we improve on textbook conversations using dice? The following are a few suggestions and are not intended to be a complete explanation of the technique. In fact, the technique is virtually unlimited depending on how creative you are in any given situation.

Below is a conversational exercise from, "Interchange", by Jack Richards. (1990), and a possible sample lesson. The main objective of the lesson is the using of the simple past tense.

Mike: Hi, Celia! How was your trip to Japan?

Celia: It was wonderful! I really enjoyed it.

Mike: How long were you there?

Celia: I was there for three weeks.

Mike: Great! And did you go to Kyoto?

Celia: Yes, it's a beautiful city.

Mike: What did you do there?

Celia: Well, I visited some temples.
They're really fantastic!
And then I went to a sumo match in
Osaka. That was fun!.

Mike: And did you like Japanese food?

Celia: Yes, I did, but I didn't like sushi.

Mike: Oh, really? I love it!

Celia: By the way, do you want to see my
photos?

Mike: Sure!

While the students are practicing the above conversation, write the categories below on the board. Then give a die to each group (ideally it's best to give one die for each pair). The students roll once for each category and write their choice down. In the example below the die should be rolled four times, once for each category.

1	2	3	4
Country	How Long	Do	Spent
1. Australia	1. 1 day	1. Visited ...	1. ¥100
2. USA	2. 1 week	2. Went to ...	2. ¥1,000
3. England	3. 2 weeks	3. Saw ...	3. ¥5,000
4. Egypt	4. 1 month	4. Tried ...	4. ¥10,000
5. Iran	5. 2 months	5. Watched ...	5. ¥100,000
6. Yugoslavia	6. 1 year	6. Rode ...	6. ¥1,000,000

Category 1 is the country the student has visited. Category 2 is the length of stay. In Category 3 the student must use the past tense of the verb to describe what s/he did there. Category 4 is the amount that the student spent for a souvenir for his/her partner.

After the students have made their choices, they can then plug the information into the conversation. The first two categories involve simple repetition of the above conversation with only exchanging the country name and the length of stay. The last two categories demand that the student think about the country s/he went to and to create his/her own responses. The answers should be in line with the choices made. For example, if the student was in a certain country for only one day, then s/he could not be expected to do much. However, if the student was in the country for one year, then his/her answer should be more complete. In addition to the repetition, which reinforces the target language, the students are

now utilizing and creating, relatively painlessly, new verb forms and sentence constructions.

The above example can naturally be expanded to include different categories with additional information. Categories for age, sex, season, profession, and others can be created. As an example: a female doctor aged 55 going to the USA in the winter is likely to experience and do things differently than a male student aged 22 visiting in the summer. Once the students have been introduced to this technique, they can be encouraged to create their own categories.

Other suggestions: Creating RPC's and defining their functions is limited only by your imagination. Here are a few suggestions or scenarios you may wish to try.

Descriptions: Have the students describe their "Home." Categories could include the names of the rooms, the color of the room, size, condition and whether it has certain amenities such as a pool or tennis court.

Verbs: Have the students take a trip. Set up categories for: Destinations, things they need to "Have," what they "Can" do, "Transportation," etc. Do they "Have" certain necessary items for the trip? "Can" they do certain things on the trip? For example, do they "Have" a passport? If not, what do they "Have" to do to get one. Do

the "Have" sun block? If not, what are the consequences. "Can" they ski, swim, etc.? If not what "Can" they do?

Directions: Draw a map on the board. Mark in some treasure rooms and snake pits and assign a number to certain directions, i.e. Right 1, Left 2, and so on. Have the students describe where they are going and where they end up with a roll of the dice.

These are just a few suggestions. Creating categories and using dice can be used for almost any conversational setting, from ordering from a menu, to shopping, following directions, describing physical characteristics, describing their home, explaining a family tree or a company's organizational chart, and many others. Any conversation can be transformed from a dull repetitive conversational exercise to something much more interesting. Any of the scenarios above can be directed either by the teacher or the students with a little instruction. After a few practice runs the students can easily direct the scenario by themselves, leaving the teacher to circulate and check on the others' progress.

The Technique and Existing Theories

How does the above technique fit in with existing theories of language acquisition? Since Chomsky's criticisms of the stimulus-response method of language acquisition, an explosion of ideas and new theories on how best to facilitate language acquisition has come into being.

One, Caleb Gattegno's Silent Way, felt that students, "cannot learn a language simply by repeating what they hear spoken around them." (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p.51). And that, "language acquisition must be a procedure whereby people use their own thinking processes, or cognition, to discover the rules of the language they are acquiring." (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p.51). Using the role-playing technique described above, especially for categories 3 and 4, forces students to think out their answers and not merely repeat the responses given them in most texts. Mistakes will be made and are, indeed, a natural part of the learning process.

On the heels of Gattegno, was Georgi Lozanov with his Suggestopedia method. Lozanov felt that language learners, "...set up physiological barriers to learning: We fear that we will be unable to perform, that we will be limited in our ability to learn, that we will fail." (Larsen-Freeman, 1986, p.72). If we are able to get rid of the fears the student will overcome the barriers and learn more effectively. This role-playing technique helps to overcome these fears. First, it puts the student in control of the learning process. Rather, the student feels that s/he is in control. Allowing the student to create the categories helps him/her to feel that s/he is directing the flow of the conversation. This is his/her conversation and not one dictated from above. This sense of control will help loosen the fears associated with language learning. In addition, it is more playful, thereby allowing freer expression.

Next, we come to James Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) method. "Asher sees successful adult second language learning as a parallel process to child first language acquisition. He claims that speech directed to young children consists primarily of commands, which the children respond to physically before they begin to produce verbal responses." (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p.87). The essence of Asher's theory is repetition. Categories 1 and 2 provide for this repetition. Additionally, categories can be created, especially for beginning students, that consist primarily of commands. For example, "Turn Right," "Stand Up," etc.

There are other theories of language acquisition, but the above represent some of the most well known. With all of them though, there is a greater problem. Namely, no matter which theory of language acquisition a teacher subscribes to, he/she is usually loaded with a textbook that either caters to one theory in particular, or more likely, one that tries to incorporate many of the above elements thereby lessening their effect. Using the above technique will, hopefully, help to enliven the conversations found within them.

Conclusion

Nunan (1989 p.10) describes the communicative task "as a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form." Creating categories and using dice changes the content and form of textbook conversations. The student is put into a hands-on learning

situation where s/he is actively interacting in the language, thereby making the exercise more meaningful.

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